

FORUM

VIETNAMESE TRADITIONAL PROVERBS AND FOLK SONGS ABOUT THE SPECIALTIES OF THANH REGION

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Abstract

The agricultural products of Thanh region are diverse and abundant: ranging from plant-based and animal-based origins in nature to processed varieties, all featuring distinctive flavors. Among these, some superior in quality have become specialties. These products are not just food for humans but also embody the culture of Thanh homeland. Vietnamese proverbs and folk songs have preserved and passed down these products through folklore from ancient times to the present, recording the culinary identity of this historically and culturally rich region and reflecting the locals' pride in their homeland. This article, based on surveys in the corpus of proverbs and folk songs combined with fieldwork methods in various localities in Thanh Hóa province, aims to highlight the literary and cultural values of these traditional sayings and songs. Additionally, the article contributes to affirming the value and quality of Thanh's specialties and promoting them to both local and distant tourists.

Keywords: *proverbs, folk songs, specialties, Thanh region*

1. INTRODUCTION

Folk songs typically reflect the innermost thoughts, ideas, and emotions of people, whereas proverbs mirror the collective experiences of the laboring populace distilled through the process of production and social interaction. Additionally, both these literary forms also encapsulate the agricultural products of various rural areas across the country. The

agricultural products of the Thanh region, notably the superior ones known as specialties, have been significantly incorporated into proverbs and folk songs. Many of these specialties were even used to honor the king. This inclusion not only represents the local people's pride in their products but also highlights the uniqueness of traditional Vietnamese

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proverbs and folk songs in depicting the specialties of the Thanh region.

The terrain, climate, and waterways are critical factors for distinctive agricultural products in each region. Moreover, the secret techniques and skillful processing have elevated these regional products to the status of specialties. The concept of a specialty isn't confined to products first originating in a region or locality; it also encompasses those widely used locally or superior in quality to similar products and considered traditional by the local people. Thanh Hóa's specialties are rich in both plant-based (crops) and animal-based origins, ranging from raw, natural forms to processed snacks and cakes. These specialties are simply yet emphatically represented in proverbs and folk songs, affirming the quality of the products.

2. VIETNAMESE TRADITIONAL PROVERBS AND FOLK SONGS ABOUT PLANT-ORIGIN SPECIALTIES

Specific plant-origin specialties have appeared in Vietnamese proverbs and folk songs. While these specialties might be familiar in many regions, those from Thanh Hóa are distinguished by their use as royal offerings, including Đường Tròn sugarcane, royal bananas, Thường Ngọc Châu cinnamon (particularly white cinnamon), and Tứ Trụ rice cakes.

Through our research, we found that although the proverbs and folk

songs mentioning sugarcane are not numerous, they distinctively represent the quality of Thanh Hóa compared to other local products. These specialties are reflected in both direct and indirect forms in proverbs and folk songs. To directly depict them, folk songs and proverbs associate these specialties with specific localities: Triệu Tường sugarcane in Hà Long commune (Hà Trung district), Kim Tân sugarcane in Thạch Thành, sugarcane in Thọ Xuân, and cinnamon in Chính Sơn (Thường Xuân). These proverbs and folk songs about sugarcane stem from cultural and historical anecdotes related to King Quang Trung. The sugarcane products are recounted by the elders: King Quang Trung, during his campaign against the Thanh invaders, passed through Thạch Thành and rested his troops there. The locals offered sugarcane, which the king found exceptionally delicious. He inquired about the name of the land and named the sugarcane after it, urging the locals to maintain this sugarcane variety. In the same campaign, King Quang Trung chose the land of Gia Miêu - Yên Vĩ (Triệu Tường) in Tống Sơn (Hà Trung) for his strategic military encampment. Here, the king enjoyed sugarcane grown on the red soil hills of Bạng and ông Phụ in Triệu Tường, Yên Vĩ, now part of Hà Long commune, Hà Trung district. The sugarcane, known for its soft stems that could be easily broken by hand without a knife, was also presented to

the king. These stories have led to a connection between these localities and the proverbs and folk songs about their sugarcane and other specialties, and vice versa. An example is the proverb:

"Án Đồ is known for its tea/ Tống Sơn for its sugarcane, Nghè market for its yams"

(Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật, 1995);

"Today we have Triệu Tường sugarcane, waiting for Nam Ổ fish sauce, Phú Yên sugar"

(Nguyễn Xuân Kính, 2002).

Nowadays, Thanh Hóa sugarcane remains famous and is passed down through sayings like "Triệu Tường sugarcane with Giàng oranges offered to the King, the King to the Thiên Đàn Nam Giao ritual." Sugarcane has also become part of festivals. Visitors to the region still hear festival songs like: "June for the thorny pineapple festival, February for the sugarcane festival." Here, 'gai' refers to the thorny pineapple, while 'mía' is the sugarcane. During the Sòng Temple festival in Bẩm Sơn region, visitors always seek to buy Triệu Tường sugarcane from Yên Vĩ to enjoy its flavor. Thus, Triệu Tường sugarcane is a specialty not only presented to the kings in the capital but is also well-known among people from various regions:

"June for the thorny pineapple festival, February for the sugarcane festival"

(Nguyễn Xuân Kính, 2002).

The thorny pineapple and Đường Trèo sugarcane are precious treats

during the regional festivals. At the Sòng Temple festival in Bẩm Sơn, visitors invariably seek to purchase Triệu Tường sugarcane from the Yên Vỹ area to savor its flavor. Thus, Triệu Tường sugarcane is not only a specialty presented to the royalty in the capital, but it is also well-known and sought after by people from various regions for its unique taste. The significance of Đường Trèo sugarcane extends beyond proverbs to its proud representation in music. Additionally, Vạn Lại (Xuân Châu, Thọ Xuân, Thanh Hóa) is famous for its delicious, richly sweet sugarcane. Here, sugarcane is abundant, and locals are skilled in extracting sugarcane juice and processing it into high-quality sugar and molasses; this is reflected in the proverb "Vạn Lại sugarcane sugar, Bù market pickled mustard greens."

When discussing Thanh's specialties, we cannot overlook the valuable and famous medicinal plant: Cinnamon. The Đại Nam nhất thống chí records: "Though produced in the South, Thanh Hóa cinnamon is the best, followed by Nghệ An cinnamon... In the 17th year of Minh Mệnh's reign, its image was engraved on the Nghị đỉnh" (Nguyễn Dynasty National History Institute, 2013). Due to its value and fame, Thanh Hóa cinnamon rarely features in mass exports "as it's all bought up locally." Whenever Thanh cinnamon is sold, the French provincial chief announces it, attracting buyers from all over Indochina (Minh Hiệu anthology, 2014). Cinnamon is

cultivated in Thường Xuân, Lang Chánh, Quan Hóa, but the most famous is from Vạn Xuân (formerly Trịnh Vạn), Thường Xuân, known as Thường ngọc châu cinnamon. Particularly esteemed is the white cinnamon of Thường Xuân, which turns milky white when brewed. This cinnamon was presented to the Nguyễn Dynasty emperors to cure the Empress Dowager's eye pain. In the past, a ring of white cinnamon was worth ten taels of gold. Today, cinnamon remains an essential spice in various appealing dishes. The proverb "Hue's spring rolls, Thanh's cinnamon" (Nguyễn Xuân Kính, 2002) continues to convey its value.

The proverbs reveal that cinnamon is first and foremost a Vietnamese specialty grown in many regions, but the most renowned and of the highest quality is Thanh cinnamon. This is a source of pride for the Thanh cinnamon specialty as reflected in the proverbs.

In addition to directly reflecting specialties tied to specific localities, Thanh's proverbs and folk songs indirectly depict them through comparisons with beautiful love stories of talented young men and beautiful women dating:

*"I am like tender sugarcane
You are like royal bananas, waiting for
whom?"*
(Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật, 1995)
"Cinnamon bark with spicy betel leaves

*We're like a pair, awaiting our wedding
day"*
(Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật, 1995)
*"Challenge you to go to Ngân river
Catch the duck swimming in the sky
Challenge me to reach the horizon
Pluck the red cinnamon flowers, teasing
the moon's residents"*
(Nguyễn Xuân Kính, 2002)
They also use these specialties to compare with the enduring loyalty and love of couples:
*"We are like sugarcane and ginger
Ginger spicy, sugarcane sweet, their scent
filling the air"*
(Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật, 1995)
*"We're like cinnamon in the drawer
Open it, and the fragrance dispels the
sorrowful heart"*
(Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật, 1995)
Sometimes, they reflect the laments and fate of less fortunate girls in life:
*"Neither here nor there works out
Here they want a beautiful wife, there
seeking a quick husband
Favoring bananas, but the bananas are too
high
Fancy him, but he puts on airs too high"*
(Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật, 1995)
*"I'm like a cinnamon tree in the field
For the owl to perch, causing the cinnamon
distress
When will the owl fly away
Fairies sit at the cinnamon's base, then the
cinnamon is pleased"*
(Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật, 1995)
*"I'm like a cinnamon tree in the woods
Fragrant at the base, the top, is it fragrant
in the middle?"*

*I'm like a cinnamon tree in an official's
house*

*Some pluck the top, others plan to break a
branch"*

(Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật,
1995)

From associating specialties with the land of their origin to using them as metaphors in lyrical subjects to express philosophies and sincere advice for life, these create a wide-reaching impact of the products and the medium carrying them, the proverbs, and folk songs. This is a unique way of reflecting the specialties in Vietnamese proverbs and folk songs.

Proverbs not only reflect natural specialties but also preserve the memory of processed Thanh Hóa specialties with distinctive and memorable flavors to visitors: Phở Quảng tea (Vĩnh Lộc), Tứ Trụ sticky rice cakes, Thọ Xuân rice cracker cakes, Quảng village wine (Quảng Xương), Chi Nê wine (Hậu Lộc), Vạn village wine (Thiệu Hóa)...

It can be affirmed that these specialties, created through diligent labor and processing, are a culmination of the essence of simple yet unique agricultural products. From Thanh Hóa city, traveling west on national highway 45 to Tây Đô fortress (Vĩnh Lộc), visitors can enjoy a sweet and fragrant candy made from sticky rice flour and sugarcane syrup, with the nuttiness of roasted peanuts and a hint of ginger, coated with a thin layer of sticky rice flour. This product is known

as Phở Quảng tea – a specialty of Thanh region. The process of making Phở Quảng tea requires meticulous, enduring, and skillful hands. The main ingredients are sticky rice flour, mixed finely with sugarcane syrup, maltose, sugar, roasted peanuts, and a bit of ginger. Once cooked to a honey-gold color, it's poured into molds, flattened, and cut into finger-sized strips. It becomes crispy when cool. Enjoying Phở Quảng tea with hot green tea is a delightful experience. This tea originates from local ingredients, skillfully and elaborately processed by the people of Vĩnh Lộc, and has traveled with visitors to many places in the country. Hence, the proverb: "Giàng village ghost money, Phở Quảng tea" (Nguyễn Xuân Kính, 2002). Visitors to the Hồ Dynasty Citadel, a world cultural heritage site, will surely enjoy this tea and take it home as a gift.

When visiting the ancient capital of the Lê Dynasty, one cannot miss the royal offering: Tứ Trụ sticky rice cakes. This cake features the smooth texture of sticky rice flour, blended with the cool taste of thoroughly stewed, finely ground, and sweet, sticky sugarcane syrup; the gentle sweetness of mung beans, the richness of old coconut meat; the aroma of sesame seeds sprinkled outside the cake's wrapper, and the distinctive smell of dried banana leaves enveloping the cake... Made from simple, natural ingredients, Tứ Trụ sticky rice cakes have become part of the culture and life of Thanh

province. During important festivals or on the death anniversaries of Lê Lai and Lê Lợi, these cakes are proudly offered on the altar as a symbol of the local flavor. Therefore, in Lam Kinh (Thọ Xuân), one must try Tứ Trụ sticky rice cakes and remember the folk saying: "Tứ Trụ sticky rice cakes or Mía village sticky rice cakes" (Field Research, 2016).

Besides sticky rice cakes and Phở Quảng tea, Châu Long rice paper (Thịệu Châu commune, now Tân Châu, Thịệu Hóa) is also a famous specialty. Rice paper, also known as bánh đa, is made from plain rice flour, spread thin over steam, sprinkled with sesame seeds, then dried and crisped over charcoal. It has a fragrant, crispy flavor from the grilled rice flour, enriched by sesame. The rice paper can be eaten alone or with boiled peanuts, snail meat, etc., but perhaps the best way is with coconut meat; the crispy, dry texture of the rice paper gradually absorbs the fatty, sweet taste of coconut oil. Hence, the Thanh Hóa people continue to pass down sayings like: "Though beaten by the husband, still keep the coconut meat, rice paper," or "Though beaten deservedly, still keep the rice paper, coconut meat," or "Though beaten severely, still sell millet cakes, rice paper"; and "Auntie, oh auntie/ Chewing rice paper in the mouth, gnawing coconut meat" (Field Research, 2016). This product showcases the skillful processing of rice grains into a renowned dish of the

people of Châu Long (Thanh Hóa) and also guides an interesting way to enjoy it.

Through proverbs and folk songs, we can somewhat appreciate the richness and diversity of Thanh's specialties originating from crops. Whether processed or natural, these specialties have their own unique and precious flavors. This preciousness has been recorded and transmitted through proverbs and folk songs as a means of preservation. At the same time, it also reflects the pride of the locals when mentioning the special places and products of their homeland. Moreover, proverbs and folk songs contain, transmit, and preserve these products from one generation to another through the art of comparison and allegory, uniquely promoting and enhancing the value of these products.

3. VIETNAMESE TRADITIONAL PROVERBS AND FOLK SONGS ABOUT ANIMAL-ORIGIN SPECIALTIES

The diversity of mountainous, flat, and coastal areas has created the richness of Thanh's specialties. Besides plant-based products, animal-origin specialties, mainly seafood, are also widely transmitted in proverbs and folk songs, such as: phi fish (Hoằng Hóa), clams (Giàng village), Mực river black carp (Nông Cống), Do Xuyên and Ba Làng fish sauce in Tĩnh Gia district (now Nghi Sơn town), Hà Yên shrimp paste, Cổ Lũng duck (Bá Thước), Nga

Son snakehead fish salad, eel and banana bulb stew (Hà Trung)...

Firstly, among these specialties, proverbs and folk songs have promoted natural products such as Sài bridge phi fish, Giàng clams, Mực river black carp... Although very rustic, these were chosen as royal offerings. According to ancient traditions, around the 16th century, Queen Mother Nguyễn Thị Minh Thụy (from Văn Lộc, Hậu Lộc), wife of King Lê Trung Tông, helped the people rebuild Phủ bridge and market. In gratitude, the people offered her the delicacies of the homeland. Phi fish presented to the king are a species living at Sài bridge, in the Tra river section connecting Thuần Lộc (Hậu Lộc) and Hoằng Xuyên (Hoằng Hóa). This area's brackish water provides an ideal environment for phi fish (similar to clams) to thrive. Phi fish soup is delicious and refreshing in summer, so people often say that no matter how busy they are, they still go to Nhàn market to buy phi fish, or listen for the call "Who wants phi fish!" to buy at all costs:

"Nhàn market has lots of noodles and
phi fish
No matter the hundred tasks, still go to
Nhàn market"
(Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật, 1995)
"I'm a girl from Phụng Đình
Roaming the provinces daily, calling: 'Who
wants phi fish?'"
(Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật, 1995)

Alongside phi fish, clams are another mollusk species, similar in taste but living in freshwater, particularly renowned are the clams from the Chu and Mã rivers at the confluence near Giàng village. Formerly known as Dương Xá in Thiệu Dương commune, Thiệu Hóa district (now part of Thanh Hóa city), Giàng village, the hometown of Dương Đình Nghệ, is known for its large green-shelled clams, which when boiled produce a milky white broth reminiscent of sticky rice water and are delicious to eat. These clams can be used in soups or stir-fries. In the past, this type of clam was also chosen as a royal offering. To this day, the locals proudly pass down the saying: "Thiệu Dương clams, Chí Cẩn sauce; Giàng clams cooked with Malabar spinach/ Whoever wants happiness come to this land" (Field Research, 2016).

There's also pride in the traditional professions of "clam digging, phi fish trading" of their hometown expressed in a young man's love declaration in a folk song from Hoằng Hóa:

"Hey girl with the green belt
If you come to Đồng Ích with me, come
please
Đồng Ích has many jobs and trades
One is clam digging, the other is phi fish
trading" (Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng
Nhật, 1995)
The culinary richness of Thanh Hóa is
also reflected in the variety of
specialties mentioned in folk songs:

Remember the market of Bản, where you went

There's no shortage of pork, beef, or buffalo

Common goats are plenty to be found

To find the best goats, you must go down to Mật Sơn bridge

For duck meat, know where to ask

Go to Trạc Nhật, inquire about the big flock of ducks

Chợ Môi has the Cồ chicken breed

Even a fighting cock, you'll also buy

Black carp from Mực river, oh so delicious

Go to Nông Cống, buy a hundred of them

Cửa Trào, cửa Vích have the best shrimp

Go out to the sea, buy some for elegance

Also buy some Ba Làng fish sauce

Gia pickles, Hạc eggplants, and Thạch Thành bamboo shoots

(Nguyễn Xuân Kính, Phan Đăng Nhật, 1995)

Many specialties are named in the song above, yet we can select high-quality ones: mountain goats, ducks, Mực river black carp, Vích and Trào shrimp, fish sauce... In Thanh Hóa, many visitors desire to savor dishes like straw-bedded goats, roasted duck, steamed shrimp...

The proverb and folk song tradition also preserves the specialty of Thanh's coastal region - fish sauce. Do Xuyên and Ba Làng fish sauce, special products of Tĩnh Gia, are made from the essence of anchovies fermented for years. The sauce, amber in color, carries the salty taste of the sea and the sweetness of the fish - a characteristic flavor of Tĩnh Gia's coastline. The fish sauce is so rich that it's said eating Mực river black carp (weighing tens of kilograms, with white chicken-like

meat, large and firm, not fishy, and rich in fat) dipped in these fish sauces would make even the dead want to return from the afterlife to suck on the fish bones: "Black carp from Mực river dipped in Do Xuyên fish sauce, even the dead would want to return to suck the bones" (Nguyễn Xuân Kính, 2002).

In culinary culture, the principle of balancing yin and yang in cooking has been valued since ancient times, and it still holds value today. The elaborate dish of eel stewed with young banana bulbs and flowers is a specialty of Hà Trung: The best eels are chosen in August (fat, yellow) to be cooked raw, deboned, rolled around young banana bulbs, green banana fingers (already sliced and treated to remove bitterness), then tied with fresh green onion leaves or cut into short segments and stewed with pork belly, ferment, and spices like lemongrass, chili, onion, fresh turmeric... until tender. When ready, add herbs like cilantro, Vietnamese mint, perilla, and fresh onions. Enjoying the steaming pot of eel stew, one can taste the richness of the pork, the sweetness of the eel, the unique flavors from the banana bulb and flower, and the sourness of the ferment along with the aroma of the spices. This dish, elaborate yet rustic, uses only ingredients that can be caught or picked in the local gardens. Importantly, the eel stew not only harmonizes the ingredients and presents a rustic flavor but also carries the affection and skill of the Hà Trung

people in preparing it. The allure of this dish has been preserved in folk songs as a special and sincere sentiment, like an enduring relationship for those who have tasted it:

"Cá rô combined with a clay pot Just like banana bulbs and golden eels intertwined"
(Field Research, 2016) or

"In the midst of a war, three tunnels deep Who brings banana bulbs to mix with eel"
(Field Research, 2016)

Each dish contains the essence of the homeland, the flavor of each different region. This is part of the soul of Thanh region, embedded in its specialties and preserved through proverbs and folk songs as an unspoken bond.

4. CONCLUSION

Vietnamese traditional proverbs and folk songs about Thanh Hóa's specialties, though not uniformly reflecting the specialties distributed across different areas, have contributed to our understanding of the specialties of Thanh land. By directly reflecting them linked to the localities where they originate, these literary forms have helped people understand the relationship between natural environmental conditions and local culture. Moreover, proverbs and folk songs use these specialties to express thoughts and feelings between people, enhancing the value of agricultural products related to the lives of traditional agrarian communities. While plant-based specialties tend towards natural and

confectionery products, animal-based specialties lean towards processed foods and main dishes, particularly seafood and seasonings. Thus, we can see the richness and diversity in the culinary culture of Thanh Hóa with these specialties being the main subjects reflected in Vietnamese proverbs and folk songs. Notably, regardless of whether they are rustic or elaborate, Thanh's specialties have been chosen as royal offerings. This is the reason why the quality of these specialties has always been preserved and enhanced. The proverbs and folk songs reflecting Thanh's famous specialties can be seen as a handbook preserving the cultural values of Thanh's culinary heritage. They contribute to preserving and promoting these specialties, conserving traditional dishes and flavors, indicating the origin and development of local craft culture, and are a source of pride for the people of Thanh. This uniqueness of proverbs and folk songs in reflecting the specialties of the land of "precious herbs" and "valuable fragrances" is remarkable.

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